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AUTHOR Chao, Georgia T.; Gardner, Philip D.
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ABSTRACT

Data from managers were used to compare a perceptually based measure of career plateau with the traditional measure based on job tenure. Subjects were 1,253 alumni from 10 graduation classes who received baccalaureate degrees between the years 1952 and 1985 from a large public university in the Midwest. On a questionnaire, perceptions of a career plateau were measured by three items related to opportunities for promotion and career future. Another measure of plateau was defined by job tenure. Results from four outcome measures (intrinsic job satisfaction, extrinsic job satisfaction, organizational identification, and career planning) showed the perceptually based measure of career plateaus to account for significantly more variance than the job tenure-based measure. Hierarchical regression analyses for the managerial sample supported job tenure as a moderator of the relationship between a perceived career plateau and the hypothesized outcomes. The negative effects of a career plateau were most pronounced when the plateau was perceived during the early years of an individual's job tenure. Results are discussed with regard to the perception, adjustment, and consequences of career plateaus. Contains 26 references. (JDD)

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Career Plateaus Among Managers

Georgia T. Chao, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Management

Philip D. Gardner, Ph.D.
Research Administrator
Collegiate Employment Research Institute

October, 1989

Collegiate Employment Research Institute
Michigan State University
113 Student Services
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI 48824

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ABSTRACT

Data from 1,227 managers were used to compare a perceptually-based measure of career plateau with the traditional measure based on job tenure. Results from four outcome measures: intrinsic job satisfaction, extrinsic job satisfaction, organizational identification, and career planning showed the perceptually-based measure of career plateaus to account for significantly more variance than the job tenure-based measure. Hierarchical regression analyses for the managerial sample also supported job tenure as a moderator of the relationship between a perceived career plateau and the hypothesized outcomes. Specifically, the negative effects of a career plateau were most pronounced when the plateau was perceived during the early years of an individual's job tenure. Results are discussed with regard to the perception, adjustment, and consequences of career plateaus.

Recent attention to career plateaus can be attributed to two major developments. First, many organizations have restructured and downsized their management and labor forces in order to enhance their competitive edge. These changes have closed off opportunities for promotion, forcing many people into plateaued careers. Thus, the number of people who are unlikely to receive future promotions has increased dramatically, highlighting the need to better understand individual and organizational reactions and interventions to those in career plateaus (Fisher, 1988; Nowlin, 1988). Second, recent advances in career development research have examined antecedents and consequences associated with career plateaus.

In our earlier work (Chao and Gardner, 1989), an extensive review of the literature found that research examining the effects of career plateaus has been inconclusive. A consistent problem, appearing throughout, was the rather imprecise definition of career plateau used in many of the studies. We argued that the career plateau depended on the individual's perceptions of his or her career; rather than quantifying a plateau as either job tenure (an extended period in the same position) or a rating of the likelihood for future promotions.

To overcome the limitations presented by earlier empirical research, we proposed an examination that would: (1) treat a plateau as a continuous variable; and (2) compare job tenure (the most commonly used definition of plateau) with an individually-based definition.

Our 1988 results indicated that a perceptually-based measure of career plateaus can account for significant additional variance in outcome measures over traditional measure based on job tenure. These results were not conclusive, however, due to the failure to find significant differences between plateaued and nonplateaued individuals based on job tenure. This failure may stem from the sample which included a number of people in occupations that have traditionally accepted plateaus, e.g., teachers, nurses, and technicians.

Because managers have probably been the most affected group during recent organizational restructuring, this analysis was applied to only managers from our original population. It was expected that this managerial group would have aspirations to move as high as possible up the organizational hierarchy. Thus, the lack of future promotions may lead to a clearer definition of plateau than in other occupations where plateaus may occur quickly.

HYPOTHESES

With regard to specific hypothesized outcomes of career plateaus, stereotypes of the plateaued employee as the slow-track, less successful careerist dominate the literature. Stoner et al. (1980) used the labels "solid citizens" and "deadwood" to describe people who have plateaued; these labels are typically less desirable than names assigned to nonplateaued people (e.g., "stars" and "learners"). Thus, career plateaus have been hypothesized to be negatively related to positive outcomes such as job satisfaction and company identification, as well as career development activities such as career planning. Although the current empirical research is mixed in its findings, results may be confounded by the operationalization of career plateaus as a dichotomous variable measured primarily by job tenure.

The first hypothesis for the current study states that perceptions of a career plateau will be negatively related to job outcomes such as intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction, company identification, and career planning.

The relationship between job tenure and career plateaus may be a more complicated one. Gould and Penley (1985) found job tenure to be positively related to willingness to relocate. However, Noe, Steffy, and Barber (1988) reported conflicting results when they found job tenure to be negatively related to willingness to accept another job. Since job tenure is often related to other time-based variables that may affect career decisions (e.g., age, career stage, years living in a particular community, etc.), it is confounded with other psychological constructs. A perceptual measure that directly taps the conceptual definition of a career plateau may offer a better examination of the career plateau-job outcomes relationships.

The second hypothesis states that the perceptual conceptualization of career plateau will account for more variance in the outcome measures than a traditional plateau measure using job tenure.

Although career plateaus can be extended beyond the advancement opportunities within one organization, the research using job tenure to operationalize a career plateau restricts this construct to one organization. Career plateaus within an organization may be a facet of general career plateaus. Individuals who perceive blocked career opportunities within the current organization may not perceive an absolute career plateau when opportunities outside the current organization are considered. Thus, the career plateau within one organization may only affect those outcomes that are directly tied to that organization.

A third hypothesis states that the measures of a career plateau within an organization will account for more variance in outcome measures directly affected by organization membership (e.g., extrinsic job satisfaction and company identification), as opposed to more general outcome measures (e.g., intrinsic job satisfaction and general career planning).

Although a perceptual measure can better capture the conceptualization of a career plateau, time-based considerations of a plateau should not be ignored altogether. Job tenure measures time in a particular position and the longer the tenure, the more a perceived plateau may be objectively supported. As time passes, perceptions about a career plateau may intensify and serve as a trigger for other activities. Conversely, the relationship between career plateaus and other activities may be non-linear as time passes. For example, the relationship between a perceived plateau and career planning may differ across various job tenures. An individual who perceives a career plateau early in his or her job tenure may engage heavily in career planning in order to reverse the plateau, whereas an individual who perceives a career plateau and has a long job tenure may perceive any further career planning as futile and abandon such activities. Likewise, an individual who does not perceive a career plateau may be involved in career planning regardless of his or her job tenure. Thus, the relationships between perceived plateaus and outcome measures may vary as job tenure changes.

The fourth hypothesis states that job tenure will moderate the relationship between perceived career plateaus and outcome measures.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

The participants in this study were part of a larger study examining the career development of baccalaureate graduates from a large public university in the Midwest. Alumni from ten graduation classes were selected to obtain data from a large cross-section of people who graduated between the years 1952 and 1985. With this sampling procedure, 33,505 questionnaires were mailed and 7,848 were returned for a response rate of 23.4%. This response rate is a conservative estimate because the questionnaires were sent via bulk mail. Thus, it was not possible to determine how many questionnaires never reached alumni due to bad addresses (no forward mailing was allowed with bulk mail) and the number of deceased alumni was also unknown. Of the 7,848 respondents, 6,279 reported that they were employed full-time. Of this full-time employed group 1,253 (19.9%) reported managerial occupations. Since managerial careers are typically described by hierarchical career advancement, the hypotheses were tested on this sample of 1,253. The sample was predominately a white (96.9%), male (77.1%), upper middle-class group with a median family income between $50,000 and $75,000. The respondents' ages ranged from 22 to 66 with a mean age of 41.02.

Measures

Career Plateau. Perceptions of a career plateau were measured by three items related to opportunities for promotion and career future. These items are presented in Table 1. The first item requested a rating on the employee's promotional opportunities; the other two items were modifications of items from the Career Future scale of the Index of Organizational Reactions (IOR; Smith, 1976). The reliability of the three-item scale as measured by coefficient alpha was .77.

Table 1

Items From Career Plateau and Importance of Career Growth Scales[a] Career Plateau Items:

1. Do you believe your opportunities for promotion have been limited in your organization? (Reverse score) (Limited to a great extent -- Not limited at all)
2. I'm making no progress (not getting ahead) in this organization. (Strongly disagree -- Strongly agree)
3. With regard to my future here, hard work does not seem worthwhile. (Strongly disagree -- Strongly agree)

[a]All items were rated on a five point rating scale. Anchors to the end-scale points are provided in parentheses.

In addition to the perceptual measure of career plateau, another measure of plateau was defined by job tenure. Since the selection of a particular tenure level as defining the plateau was rather arbitrary, this measure was retained as a continuous variable. For purposes of clarification, the perceptual measure of career plateaus will be labeled Plateau-P and the tenure defined measure will be labeled Plateau-T.

Career Measures. The comparison of a perceptual measure and a job tenure measure of career plateaus will be evaluated on four hypothesized outcomes: intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction, career planning, and company identification. These outcomes were selected for two primary reasons: 1) all have been hypothesized as related to career plateaus in earlier research (Evans & Gilbert, 1984; Near, 1985; Slocum et al., 1985; Stout et al., 1988; Stoner et al., 1980; Veiga, 1981 and 1982) given that the career plateau measures are restricted to plateaus within the current organization, a comparison between general outcome variables and outcomes more directly influenced by the organization is planned.

Two outcome measures were selected because they are directly associated with evaluations of the respondent's current organization. These measures are extrinsic job satisfaction and company identification. Extrinsic job satisfaction focused on job facets like pay and supervision; factors provided or controlled by the organization. Extrinsic job satisfaction was measured by six items from the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ; Weiss, Dawis, England, & Lofquist, 1967). Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the extrinsic job satisfaction scale was .80. Company identification measures the strength of association between an individual and the organization. It was assessed by the Company Identification scale of the Index of Organizational Reactions (Smith, 1976). This scale contained five items reflecting attitudes toward the respondent's organization and its treatment of employees. Cronbach's coefficient alpha for this scale was .86.

Two more general outcome measures were selected because they were not directly associated with the respondent's current organization. These measures were intrinsic job satisfaction and career planning. Although both variables can be defined within an organizational context, measures were selected that did not specify direct organizational constraints. Intrinsic job satisfaction is a general variable focusing on the work itself and may be influenced by the individual's knowledge skills, and abilities, as well as organizational structure. This variable was measured by 11 items from the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ; Weiss, Dawis, England, & Lofquist, 1967). Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the intrinsic job satisfaction scale was .84. Likewise, career planning can be a general measure that is independent from the individual's current organization. This measure was assessed with a six item scale tapping the respondent's career objectives, plans, and strategy for achieving career goals (Gould, 1979). Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the career planning scale was .88.

Analyses

The hypotheses were tested by hierarchical multiple regression analyses to assess the incremental explanatory power of the perceptual measure over the traditional measure of plateau defined by job tenure. Three independent variables were used to predict each of the four outcome variables: in the first step each dependent variable was regressed on the

Plateau-T measure; in the second step the Plateau-P scale was entered; and finally, in conventional moderated regression, the interaction term was entered to assess the significance on the additional explanatory power of the model over the two linear effects of the plateau measures.

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the dependent and independent variables for the sample are presented in Table 2. The correlations between the perceptual measure of career plateaus and tenure were nonsignificant ($r = .01$, $p < .05$), thus suggesting that the two measures are tapping different constructs.

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Inter-Scale Correlations[a]

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Independent variables:									
1. Tenure	5.66	6.43	-						
2. Plateau	2.26	.93	-01						
3. Interaction	12.78	15.98	88	31	-				
Dependent variables:									
4. Intrinsic satisfaction	4.09	.51	06	-49	-08	-			
5. Extrinsic satisfaction	3.42	.78	08	-66	-13	61	-		
6. Career Plan	4.07	.76	10	-34	00	32	32	-	
7. Company ID.	3.75	.73	10	-65	-10	58	71	29	-

[a]Sample size ranged from 1,229 to 1,248. Decimal points have been omitted from correlation coefficients. All correlations above .06 are significant at $P < .01$.

Correlations between Plateau-T and the dependent variables are smaller than comparable correlations with Plateau-P. In addition, correlations between the Plateau-P measure and the four hypothesized outcomes of career plateaus are significant and negative, indicating that those respondents who perceived themselves to be more plateaued were likely to report lower levels of intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction, career planning, and organizational identification. Thus, the first hypothesis that perceptions of a career plateau will be negatively related to job outcomes was supported.

Results from the hierarchical regression analyses were used to test Hypothesis 2, concerning comparisons between Plateau-T and Plateau-P, and Hypothesis 3, comparing the explanatory power of the plateau measures for general and organizationally specific outcomes. Using a listwise deletion of missing data, all regression analyses were based on a sample of 1,225 managers. Table 3 shows a summary of the regression analyses for all four dependent variables.

Table 3

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses Completed on Intrinsic and Extrinsic Job Satisfaction. Career Planning, and Company Identification

Dependent Variable: Intrinsic Job Satisfaction (MSQ)

Independent	**R^{2a}**	**Standardized Regression Weights**		
Variable		Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Tenure	.003	.05	.05*	-.16*
Plateau	.254**		-.50**	-.58**
Interaction	.261**			.23**

Dependent Variable: Extrinsic Job Satisfaction (MSQ)

Independent	**R^2**	**Standardized Regression Weights**		
Variable		Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Tenure	.005**	.07**	.06**	-.04
Plateau	.443**		-.66**	-.70**
Interaction	.445*			.12*

Dependent Variable: Career Planning

Independent	**R**	**Standardized Regression Weights**		
Variable		Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Tenure	.012**	.11**	.10**	-.02
Plateau	.127**		-.34**	-.39**
Interaction	.130*			.15*

Dependent Variable: Company Identification

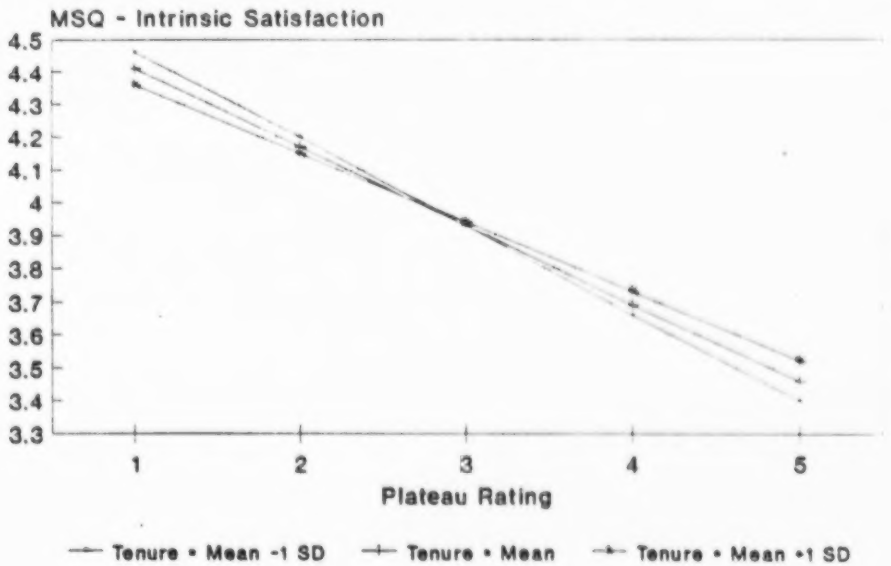
Independent	**R^2**	**Standardized Regression Weights**		
Variable		Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Tenure	.010**	.10**	.09**	-.03
Plateau	.438**		-.65**	-.70**
Interaction	.441*			.14*

[a]The first R^2 is based on the predictor in Step 1 (Tenure), the second R^2 is based on the predictors in Step 2 (Tenure and Plateau), and the third R^2 is based on all three predictors. *p < .05, **p < .01

When considering only the job tenure-defined plateau measure, Plateau-T accounted for a mere 0.3% of the variance in intrinsic job satisfaction ($F(1,1223) = 3.53$, $p < .05$), 0.5% of the variance in extrinsic job satisfaction ($F(1,1223) = 6.68$, $p < .01$), 1.2% of the variance in career planning ($F(1,1223) = 14.56$, $p < .01$), and 1.0% of the variance in company identification ($F(1,1223) = 12.24$, $p < .01$). When the perceptual measure of career plateaus was entered into the regression equations, Plateau-P significantly increased the amount of explained variance in all four dependent variables. The increase in explained variance was 25.1% for instrinsic job satisfaction ($F(2,1222) = 412.20$, $p < .01$), 43.8% for extrinsic job satisfaction ($F(2,1222) = 960.93$, $p < .01$), 11.5% for career planning ($F(2,1222) = 161.95$, $p < .01$), and 42.8% for company identification ($F(2,1222) = 932.91$, $p < .01$.). These results provide strong support for Hypothesis 2.

The explanatory power of the perceptually based measure of a career plateau was significantly higher than the job tenure-based measure. Furthermore, the results provide support for Hypothesis 3: the explanatory power of the plateau measures on the organizational outcomes (e.g., 44.3% for extrinsic job satisfaction and 43.8% for company identification) were greater than the amounts of explained variance on the general outcome (e.g., 25.4% for intrinsic job satisfaction and 12.7% for career planning).

With regard to Hypothesis 4, the incremental R^2 for the interaction term was significant for all four outcome measures. The largest effect was intrinsic job satisfaction ($F(3,1221) = 10.78$, $p < .01$) and the smallest effect for career planning ($F(3,1221) = 3.72$, $p < .05$). The relationships between Plateau-P and all four outcome measures showed similar trends -- more negative outcomes were associated with people who perceived a career plateau, and these relationships were stronger for people who perceived the plateau early in their job tenure. The results from the regression analysis on instrinsic job satisfaction were graphed for subgroups at the mean tenure level (5.66 years) and + 1 standard deviation about the mean. The results are illustrated in Figure 1.



These results provide support for Hypothesis 4, that job tenure moderates the relationship between a perceptual measure of career plateaus and specific outcomes. The relationship between perceptions of a career plateau and outcomes such as job satisfaction, career planning, and company identification were stronger and more negative for people with lower job tenure as opposed to higher job tenure.

DISCUSSION

Current empirical research on career plateaus has been equivocal in its conclusions regarding job attitudes for people who are plateaued versus nonplateaued (Slocum et al, 1985; Stout et al, 1988; Veiga, 1981). The mixed results may be due to the reliance on a secondary measure of career plateaus that was dichotomized to define plateaued and nonplateaued people. The present study compared a perceptually-based operationalization of career plateaus with the traditional measure based on job tenure. Results for two general measures: intrinsic job satisfaction and career planning; and two organizational measures: extrinsic job satisfaction and company identification showed the perceptually-based measure of career plateaus to account for significant proportions of variance over and above that accounted by job tenure.

Thus, when career plateaus were defined by self ratings on the likelihood of opportunities for future promotions, the range of additional variance explained in the dependent measures varied from 11.5% to 43.8%. The amount of incremental explained variance was greatest for the two organizational measures. Consequently, the perception of a career plateau within the organization was associated with lower levels of reported extrinsic job satisfaction and company identification. With regard to career planning and intrinsic job satisfaction, the perception of a career plateau is also associated with lower levels of these responses.

The addition of the interaction term between Plateau-T and Plateau-P also accounted for significant portions of variance on all four dependent measures. Thus, job tenure was found to moderate the relationships between perceptions of a career plateau and the four outcome measures. Given that the interaction term has the linear effects of the two plateau measures partialled out, the significance of the interaction means that the relationship between career plateaus and the outcome measures is more complex than a simple linear relationship between two predictors and one criterion.

Although the results of hierarchical regression analysis are symmetrical, i.e., mathematically one could just as easily conclude that the relationship between job tenure and the outcome measures was moderated by the perceptions of a career plateau; the identification of the moderator variable is based on the original research question. Examination of the consequences of career plateaus must be based on a conceptual definition of a plateau. Secondary measures such as job tenure are poor substitutes for a concept defined as limited future career advancement. Although the perceptual measure of career plateaus also has methodological problems, unlike job tenure it directly taps the conceptual meaning of a career plateau. Therefore, the identification of job tenure as the moderator variable to the plateau - job outcome relationship is the more logical interpretation of the regression results.

The moderating effect of job tenure on the relationships between career plateau perceptions and job attitudes complements current theories espousing the dynamic nature

of individuals and careers (Brousseau, 1984; Sonnenfeld & Kotter 1982). Early perceptions of a career plateau may be negatively viewed and can motivate the individual to make plans/decisions to avoid the plateau. If these plans/decisions are not successful, continued time in the plateau may lead the individual to accept the plateau and look for other outlets for life satisfaction. Faulkner's (1974) interviews with hockey players and symphony orchestra musicians showed that those professionals who faced blocked career opportunities often made positive comments regarding less stressful work, lowered expectations, placed more emphasis on home life instead of work life, and gained satisfaction/acceptance with their role in the organization. Thus, coping mechanisms can help the individual reduce the negative outcomes that are initially associated with a career plateau. As time passes, the effects of these coping mechanisms can help build a workforce that is both productive and satisfied with their career development.

The results supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2 indicate that a perceptually- based measure of career plateaus can account for significant additional variance in outcome measures over the traditional measure based on job tenure. If the results of the present study can be replicated with additional outcomes that are also theoretically linked to career plateaus, the consequences of career plateaus for employees experiencing them may not be as equivocal as the existing research seems to indicate. Failure to find significant differences between plateaued and nonplateaued groups based on job tenure would represent only a preliminary step exploring career plateaus, and not a conclusion that the negative effects of a career plateau may be overstated.

Results from the present study represent an important initial step in the development of appropriate measures of career plateaus. This study differs from previous research by using a reliable measure, based on the respondent's perceptions of opportunities for promotion and career future. In addition, the study compared this continuous measure with a second continuous measure based on job tenure.

Future research should move away from job tenure operationalizations and build on the concept of career plateaus. The measure used in this exploratory study represents an initial step in the development of a scale that should ultimately capture all aspects of a career plateau. The development of such a scale can proceed in two directions.

First, expansion of the conceptual definition itself can focus on the content of an individual's work. Feldman and Weitz (1988) posit that increased responsibilities on the current job can forestall the stagnation and deleterious effects of blocked upward mobility. Thus an individual who may not receive additional promotions but is constantly challenged by new tasks and responsibilities in his or her current job, may not be identified as one who is career plateaued.

Second, new measures of a career plateau should examine career mobility opportunities outside of the individual's current organization. Factors pertaining to work as well as nonwork might have to be integrated when one is contemplating career development outside of one's current organization. An individual may prefer a career plateau in one organization as opposed to the uncertainty a new job and new employer may bring. Both directions in the development of future measures of a career plateau may differentiate a career plateau from a career pinnacle. A career pinnacle is defined here as the highest organizational level or job an individual aspires. Although the achievement of this goal also conforms to the early definition of a career plateau given by Stoner et al. (1980), qualitative research and conceptual articles (Near, 1980; Stoner et al., 1980)

recognize plateau differences between those who choose to be plateaued and those who are forced into plateaus. It is time for the empirical literature to incorporate these issues in a better measure of career plateaus.

Future research using only job tenure as the operationalization of a career plateau should be discontinued. Empirical research that utilizes a conceptual definition of plateaus, with job tenure as a moderator, should provide a better understanding of relationships between a career plateau and specific antecedents and outcomes. Results from the research could help practitioners predict who is most likely to encounter a career plateau and what interventions might be initiated to prevent or reverse a plateau. For example, if career plateaus are related to stagnation in one's position, human resource managers and researchers should concentrate on those job characteristics that allow one to develop and grow within a job as well as across jobs. Organizational interventions, such as project management (Hall, 1985; Hall & Louis, 1988), mentoring (Kras, 1985), and restructured personnel policies (Feldman, 1988), as well as nonwork interests in family and leisure activities may need to be examined, or re-examined, in light of a more comprehensive definition of a career plateau. The use of job tenure data would not adequately capture how perceptions of a career plateau may intensify or change; however, an individual's perceptions about a career plateau could be used in longitudinal research to measure relationships between plateau antecedents and consequences and to plan interventions to alleviate the negative effects of career plateaus.

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